DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 060 FL 014 644

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TITLE ESL or EFL: A Reassessment of Student Needs.
INSTITUTION California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (17th, Toronto, Ontario, March 17, 1983) and the Regional Conference of the California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (Los Angeles, CA, October 22, 1983); In: CATESOL Occasional Papers, Number 10 p93-99 Fall 1984.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Needs; *English (Second Language); Higher Education; Minority Groups; Refugees; *Second Language Instruction; Speech Skills; State Universities; *Student Needs; Surveys; Urban Universities; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Students in an academically supported program of English as a second language (ESL) serving permanent residents and refugees at a large urban state university were surveyed concerning their language use patterns and educational needs for language instruction. The respondents were predominantly Southeast Asians representing siginificant minority populations in the surrounding community. Results revealed considerable prior classroom instruction in English but low use of the English language at home and work, relatively long residence in the United States but limited informal language contact in the community, and major problems with oral skills but greater concern over self-assessed lack of writing proficiency, a concern that was reflected in the ESL curriculum at the institution. It is concluded that the present program emphasis on formal conventions, particularly of written English, which neglects both expressive and receptive oral skills, does not adequately address this population's language needs, and that a program of English as a foreign language (EFL) would serve the students' needs better. (MSE)

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California Association
Teachers of English to
Speakers of Other Languages

CATESOL Occasional Papers
Number 10 (Fall, 1984)

ED253060

ESL OR EFL: A REASSESSMENT OF STUDENT NEEDS

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This paper reports the results of a student survey in an academic-support ESL program serving permanent resident and refugee students at a large urban state university. Respondents were predominantly Southeast Asians representing significant minority populations in the surrounding community. This survey revealed considerable prior classroom instruction in English, but low utilization of target language at home and work; relatively long residence in the U.S., but limited informal language contact in the community; and major problems in oral skills, but greater concern (reflected in the ESL curriculum) over self-assessed lack of writing proficiency. The survey thus points to an EFL, rather than ESL, teaching situation.

The last eight years has brought to California State University, Long Beach, as to many other campuses across the country, great numbers of resettled permanent resident limited-English students representing significant minority populations in the community surrounding the campus. Our academic-support ESL program, however, was designed with the limited-stay international student in mind. To better assess the language training needs of the permanent residents, who outnumber the Visa student on our campus almost four to one, we administered an open-ended survey during the Spring '83 term.

This article is based on a paper presented at the Seventeenth International TESOL Convention, Toronto, March 17, 1983, and the CATESOL Regional Conference, Los Angeles, October 22, 1983.

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Of the 350 surveys distributed, 241 were returned. Not all surveys were complete, so the statistical data were tabulated based on percentages of responses to a given item. No attempt was made to confirm self-reported figures against externally gathered data. The survey included questions aimed at assessing the students' socio-economic status and general degree of comfort in American society, but emphasis in this paper will be on language-related results: specifically, prior English instruction, current daily use of English, language problems encountered, and self-assessment of English proficiency.

First, some ethnographic data are in order. The majority of students surveyed were Southeast Asian, predominantly Vietnamese (65%), Korean (13%) and Chinese (including Chinese-Vietnamese, 10%). Reported ages ranged from 17 to 53; 42% were non-traditional students (26 or older and returning to school after a hiatus in their academic careers) and 59% were upperclassmen (juniors, seniors, and graduates). All were students in the American Language Program at the time of the survey.

Prior English Instruction

A surprising number (81.5%) of the students surveyed had had formal English instruction prior to immigration, although the extent of this instruction ranged from minimal to extensive.[1] A high percentage of our students had attended American high schools (41.8%) and American two-year colleges (69.8%). However, lack of access to ESL classes (one local community college reports waiting lists for ESL in excess of two years), inability of subject-matter and regular English teachers to handle massive syntax problems, and a tendency to concentrate in technical fields resulted in lower English proficiency than one would expect from such figures. A close look at the remaining data revealed that our students' use of English was for all practical purposes limited to the classroom.

Daily English Use

Crucial to the use of English at home was the prevalent (82.6%) tendency to live with family, particularly parents or members of the parental generation (76.8%). While slightly more than half (56%) of the students reported

[1] Corroborating data were supplied by Salzman at the NAFSA Region XII Workshop on New Americans; 53% of UCLA immigrant and refugee students surveyed had had English prior to immigration, 28% for more than five years.

living with someone who spoke English as well or better than they did, most of the people named in this category were same generation (siblings and spouses) or younger than the respondent (younger siblings and children). The comments revealed significant social pressure not to speak English at home, especially in the presence of older relatives:

> "Grandma doesn't speak [English] at all, so we should not."
>
> "Whenever we talk to each other [we speak English]. We speak only Vietnamese to our parents."

The net result is that fully 83% of the respondents spoke English at home less than one hour per day; only eleven out of 231 students reported using English more than five hours daily or virtually all the time.

At work, the pattern of low English use is less dramatic, but still significant. While 82.9% of the 152 respondents to this section worked with someone who spoke English as well or better than they did, fully two-thirds (64.9%) reported using English three hours or less per day on the job, and more than half of these (51%) used English one hour or less at work. This statistic is surprising since 47% of the reported jobs were distinctly service-oriented, i.e. bilingual aide in public school, library assistant, college peer counselor, school information desk clerk, computer lab assistant, and other similar employment.

Living and socializing patterns further reinforced low utilization of the target language. Only half of the respondents lived in predominantly American neighborhoods; about 25% lived in ethnically separate but non-white (that is, mainly Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc.) neighborhoods, while the remaining 25% described their neighborhoods as ethnically mixed, predominantly Hispanic (which further limited English language contacts for these students). If group membership can be considered an indicator of social, and therefore, language contact, then the respondents' pattern is truly significant: only 14% indicated affiliation with non-ethnic (or ethno-religious) organizations such as departmental clubs, professional organizations, community groups, or other local organizations.

Low utilization of English may explain why mastery of the language occurs relatively slowly. The average length of stay in the United States was five years, while a few students still enrolled in ESL classes had lived in this country between eight and ten years. It seems fair to say that while English remains compartmentalized in the classroom

and workplace, students will be slow to acquire the proficiency needed for post-secondary coursework.

Language Problems Encountered

The language problem most frequently mentioned in connection with university studies was difficulty comprehending lectures and taking notes. In the workplace, the top-ranked language problem was similar: difficulty understanding supervisors, co-workers, and customers, especially on the telephone. Yet, relatively little direct instruction in listening comprehension is provided in our highly academic, writing-oriented ESL curriculum. Interestingly, when asked to specify the type of course that would be most helpful in improving their English, students overwhelmingly (60.9%) chose writing over conversation/listening in their open-ended responses, an emphasis that reflects our curriculum rather than their most frequently mentioned need. Difficulty in writing English (especially essay tests, term papers, and lab reports) was, however, the second most frequently mentioned language problem connected with studying, and the third most frequently mentioned language problem in the workplace. The third most prevalent language-related problem connected with studying is also not directly addressed in our curriculum: reading speed and comprehension. As with conversation and oral expression, the underlying curricular assumption that the university context alone provides sufficient opportunities to practice receptive English skills is apparently erroneous.

Self-Assessment of English Proficiency

Students' assessments of their own proficiency provide further insight into their needs. Students were asked to rate five skills (pronunciation, fluency, writing, comprehension of written English, and comprehension of spoken English) on a six-point scale. Writing was once again prominant as the only skill in which the majority of students from all class levels rated themselves as lower half (1 through 3). Comprehension of spoken English, not surprisingly, followed a split pattern: lower proficiency (as determined by in-house placement) students assessed their listening skills as lower half, high proficiency students as upper half (4 through 6). A complicating factor may be length of stay in the United States, which was generally longer for upper level students, but was not controlled for in the self-assessment. Of course, in-house placement in proficiency levels may also have influenced student self-assessment. Fluency and comprehension of written English followed a similar split pattern, but less clearly defined,

while pronunciation appeared to be somewhat independent of proficiency level (intuitively reasonable and the more so since in-house placement is based more on grammar, reading, writing, and listening comprehension than on pronunciation). Interestingly, students in the lowest (intake) level rated themselves higher on writing and pronunciation than did students in the next (low-intermediate) level. These lowest level students had been surviving for an average of five years in their adopted country with a minimal code and language strategies adequate for every day use, but far removed from standard academic English. Clearly a major challenge of ESL programs serving this segment of the student body is to make them aware of the distinction and the limitations of their present language.

Conclusions

As teachers and curriculum designers, we should be aware of the differences suggested by these data between the permanent resident population and the traditional ESL population. First, the pattern of considerable classroom exposure to English, but low actual use, means we can assume a fair amount of formal language instruction that has not been adequately reinforced. Furthermore, we cannot rely on informal contacts in the environment to supply such reinforcement nor aid in natural language acquisition. Too, the presence of a large co-national group in the community means that the target language is not the only means of communication available to students learning to function in the new culture, and, as noted above, many have been successfully functioning for considerable periods of time with a non-standard code. Finally, the relatively long length of stay in the United States prior to university enrollment means a high degree of fossilization since our students have long since passed the critical period of "optimal cognitive/affective tension" necessary for significant and rapid growth (Brown: 1980).

The prolonged acquisition period of the first generation of new Americans may be just the beginning. Community demographic analysis (Wiley et al.: 1983) indicates the resettled population to be young (concentrated in the 20-29 age range) and fertile (a higher per capita birth rate than the established population).[2]

[2]Indeed, as recently reported in CATESOL News, state officials such as Alice Petrossian of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing concur that the need for language instruction of LEP students in the public schools will be felt for many years to come.

Moreover, the considerable secondary migration rate (25.1% based on our student survey; higher rates suggested by Central Intake Unit figures) results in a situation not unlike Buckingham's (1981:25) description of a border area:

> . . . these communities are constantly being reinfored by new arrivals of language minority speakers. While this retards the shift from one language to another, it also retards the ability of individuals to learn the second language. In such a situation, the need for language programs is a continuous one.

Our academic-support ESL programs, then, must reflect the needs of the large population we are currently serving as well as anticipate the needs of future generations of new Americans. Yet, our present emphasis on the formal conventions particularly of written English -- on developing our students' monitors while neglecting oral skills, both expressive and receptive -- does not adequately address the language development needs of these students. The traditional ESL curriculum assumes considerable informal language acquisition, extensive reinforcement from natural language opportunities in the environment, and intense and rapid growth among students whose only possible mode of communication in the new country and culture is the target language. Clearly these assumptions no longer fit a major portion of our ESL student body. Accumulated evidence from this study points to minimal and compartmentalized utilization of the target language, few opportunities for environmental reinforcement of classroom-learned skills, and success with minimal proficiency impeding mastery of the standard language -- in short, a better description of an EFL, rather than ESL, teaching situation.

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